

Rachel Goldfarb

Dr. McLaughlin

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The Princess Evolution

The Disney princess influence is undeniable. Cinderella backpacks continue to fill classrooms sixty-five years after its initial release, Frozen remains the highest-grossing animated film of all time, and Halloween never fails to bring forth countless gown-wearing, tiara-toting little girls. In this position of power, the princesses have faced much criticism for their weak portrayal of the female gender. While Disney princess movies have traditionally placed women in negative gender roles, there has been a progressive shift in more recent films. The construct of a Disney princess has evolved over time, beginning with the damsel in distress archetype, adhering “to the fairy-tale templates of passivity and victimage” (Bell 112), and moving into independent, empowered heroines, willing to fight to achieve their goals. This evolution can be explained by and paralleled to the three feminist waves over the last couple centuries.

The Walt Disney Company’s multi-billion-dollar success can be largely accredited to the princess phenomenon. While Disney has experienced success in numerous other productions, none can compete with the overwhelming popularity of the princesses. This lasting fixation is likely due to the constant additions to the collection, with new periodic princess releases every couple of years. Disney set the princess-mania into motion in 1937 with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and has continued to produce princess films through 2013 with its most recent blockbuster, *Frozen*. Each new release results in a resurgence of the princess popularity every few years and has created an enormous and consistently growing fan base.

“Children all over the world watch and re-watch their movies, sing along with them, prance around in miniature versions of their gowns, and bring notebooks and backpacks plastered with their images to school” (Ebersol). But despite their success in the industry, the Disney princesses are more than just their entertainment value. Each princess story contains a lesson or moral for its audience to learn. As a result, “these films serve as mirrors that reflect our culture’s shifting values” (Ebersol). An important aspect of our culture reflected in these princess stories is the perception of the female gender. The princess films illustrate the general ideas about a woman’s “importance and purpose in society at specific periods in time” (Ebersol). Analyzing the evolution of the Disney princess over time, we see a progressive shift in the ideas about women and their role in society.

Feminism is typically divided into three waves, each focusing on specific issues and inequalities experienced by women of the time. The first wave surfaced during the second part of the 19th century and was mainly concerned with women’s suffrage. Feminists of the first wave worked for women’s political equality. Notable feminists of the time include Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, both instrumental in the passage of the 19th amendment, which granted women the right to vote. However, “these women were moderate and conservative, they did not plan on making a stir in equality of the home setting” (Sawyer 9). During the first wave, women were still solely thought of as housewives, belonging in a domestic setting. Disney produced its first arc of princess movies in the wake of this first wave, reflecting “a culture in which women had received political rights but still lacked the social equality...that would come years later” (Ebersol). Consequentially, the early princesses of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* are “weak and passive, imposing an archaic image of femininity on the girls who love them” (Rothschild 35).

The original princess stories of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* undergo the most criticism from feminists. The same basic plot is used for all three movies: “a beautiful woman suffers because of circumstances out of her control and ultimately finds salvation in the love of a powerful man” (Ebersol). Several other characteristics are recycled as well. All three princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, lack much of a real personality. They are all kind-hearted, innocent, and polite, but not much beyond that. Each movie emphasizes the princess’s “joy and competence in tending house and her patience in awaiting her prince” (Rothschild 54). None of these are particularly strong or active; they merely do what they are told and wait to be rescued. This process repeats movie after movie after movie. All three films “unite into one monolithic, repetitive story” (Rothschild 72). The story begins with some sort of abandonment, leaving the princess in “reduced circumstances” (Davis 101). She loses her loving parents and must find companionship elsewhere. Each princess finds allies in the form of “small, anthropomorphized animals” (Rothschild 56). Her friendship with the animals, their shared joviality, adds to her charm, highlighting her natural innocence and increasing the wonder factor of her personality (Rothschild 56). These are the so-called positive female personality traits Disney assigns to these princesses. Another common ingredient among the three films is the inclusion of a powerful female villain with a personal vendetta against the princess. The evil villainess plots to bring about the downfall of the princess. In each tale, she comes dangerously close to success. But just as all hope seems lost for the princess, the handsome, charming prince arrives to rescue her. He saves the princess, foiling the evil villainess’s plan. The male easily prevails over the powerful female. Following the rescue, the prince and princess fall in love and of course live happily ever after.

In these initial stories, the princesses are made simple and submissive. Despite each story's princess protagonist, the male characters take dominance over the "passive, pretty princesses" (Rothschild 60). This can partially be explained by the happily ever after requirement. The happily ever after is a key element of every princess film. The prince is a key element of every happily ever after. Transitivity, the prince becomes a key element of every princess film. Each movie primarily focuses on the romantic relationship between the prince and princess. "The films' endings are not merely happy; they are happy in specifically romantic ways" (Rothschild 60). As a result, male supremacy is present in these films. Men "frame the story, serve as primary agents of activity, and are the princesses' rescuers and rewards" (Rothschild 61). The princesses are the supposed protagonists of these stories, yet the power lies with the prince. His desires drive the plot. The action only begins when the male desires something of the princess (Rothschild 71). The story progresses only as the prince decides to take action. In addition, he is ultimately the one to save the princess and bring about the resolution and subsequent happily ever after. The male characters can be viewed in some ways as more important to the actual story than the female characters, and yet these movies are superficially centered on princesses.

The prince is not the only character to reduce the role of the princess. Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are "pale and pathetic compared to the more active and demonic characters" (Rothschild 81). The evil villainesses captivate viewers with their duplicity and depravity. While these villainesses are entertaining to watch, it is important to note that they are the only display of feminine power in these films. The only powerful women Disney presents to its audience are malicious and wicked, and "the villains' ultimate damnation is inextricably linked to the power they wield" (Rothschild 84). In these early films, power in the hands of a

woman automatically results in corruption and contempt. Power when afforded to women turns “lethal: it was used only to bolster their own overweening vanity and to destroy what was pure and good in the world” (Douglas 29). These villainesses embody everything the princesses are not: power, independence, agency. But they take these positive, inspiring characteristics and use them only to accomplish evil. What message does this send to young girls? “Better to be passive and good and loved than active, if activity implies being evil and being hated” (Rothschild 84). Further, these powerful women all share similarly morbid endings. In each movie, the pattern repeats: the meek, subservient women are granted a happy ending, whereas the evil power-wielding women are destroyed. “Emulate one; eschew the other: [the] chances of a happy ending increase” (Rothschild 85). These powerful villainesses juxtaposed with the passive princesses imply that women with power will surely yield negative results.

The second wave of feminism was set off in 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. In her book, Friedan discusses the unhappiness and discontent experienced by housewives across the United States, challenging “the concept that women could only find fulfillment as wives and mothers” (Eberson). While first wave feminism focused more on political inequalities, the second wave addressed social and cultural issues. Women made the transition out of the house and into the workforce. “Feminists began to understand the psychological and material implications of sexism and sexist stereotypes, and the feminist movement helped women move beyond such thinking to expand their life options and improve their lots” (Rothschild 91). Feminists rejected the “sexist power structures of a patriarchal society” (Eberson), restricting women by confining them to traditional, domestic occupations. Women demanded the equal opportunities naturally made available to men not only in the workforce but also in terms of sexuality. Rape, birth control, and abortion were highly

contentious topics of this time period. This second wave took place alongside the Civil Rights Movement, and mimicking the country's shift in ideas about race, pulled in women of color and different cultural backgrounds. This was a time for all women to unite. "In the 1970s, some feminists turned their attention to fairy tales, encouraging women readers to understand the implications and ramifications of sexism and sexist stereotypes in literature, especially literature consumed by young girls" (Rothschild 91).

After the release of *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney took a princess hiatus. They did not revisit the princess story until the end of the 1980s, as filmmakers were searching for a way to "recapture the magic (and profitability) of the classic Disney animated films" (Rothschild 135). Given its positive reception and monumental success in the past, the princess story seemed like an obvious go-to. However, the conventional princess had become outdated against the background of second wave feminism, and filmmakers "knew they had to take into account the social changes wrought by the women's movement" (Rothschild 136). Disney released a new generation of "feminist" princess films, advertising active, headstrong protagonists to reflect the societal shift in ideas about women. *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan* were intended to refine the idea of a Disney princess, projecting a positive, empowering image of women. Unfortunately these princess stories failed to accomplish this progressive approach. "The princesses' presentations and the surface levels of their stories paid lip service to feminism and to the new expectations of girls and women, but in reality, their stories are traditionally patriarchal" (Rothschild 136). The new princesses are not as independent and different from the originals as advertised. Romance again takes precedence, allowing the male characters to dominate over the women. Further, in these new films, the male

domination does not end with the princes. Each new princess comes with a controlling father, and almost no mention of a mother.

The most revolutionary characteristic of these new princesses ends up being a shallow testament to their personalities: their appearance. In keeping with the second wave's cultural inclusion, Disney made a point to break from the blond-hair-blue-eyes prototype introducing red head, brunette, Arabic, Native American, and Chinese princesses. Their physical transformation was intended to represent a dissociation from the traditional aspects of the original princess stories: "the princesses' passivity, the importance of the male rescuer, the traditional 'good' girl character" (Rothschild 136). However, despite being infused with more superficial adventure and possibility than the previous princesses, the new princesses remain "dreamy, romance-obsessed girls who simply travel from father to beloved" (Rothschild 136). This is not to say Disney made no progress with their princess reinvention. The new princesses are more feminist and individual than the originals, to some extent. "None of them remains in servitude, passively awaiting a prince. None falls into a coma, magical or otherwise" (Rothschild 141). But this is where the progression ends.

Similar to the original arc of princess films, a male drives the story despite the female protagonist. This is apparent from the opening of each film, all of which revolve around men. This male-important theme continues throughout the films, each concluding with scenes again focusing on the male characters, both the love interests and the fathers. "The romance is not only primary to the plot; ...it has clear patriarchal approval" (Rothschild 143). And even though the new princesses are far more active than their predecessors, they are never their own liberators. The princesses are not afforded the privilege of saving themselves; they must rely on their love interest to win the final battle. Additionally, each story revolves around the idea of a

happily ever after with the princess's true love. "The implication remains that a woman will only find complete happiness with a man" (Eberson). These movies are again adhering to the classic Disney idea of girls and women always needing a man to feel loved and complete. "Although it can be argued that these princesses are an improvement over the first group of Disney princesses, their films do not fully embrace female strength and independence" (Rothschild 157).

Disney supporters may argue that while the others in the category do not exactly represent feminine power, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* appropriately express feminist ideals. While *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* take a drastic step in the right direction, they still do not completely exemplify feminism. Pocahontas and Mulan are different from the other princesses in that their stories do not begin with their yearning for husbands. Pocahontas is unsure of what she wants, but "is fairly certain she does not want the humorless Kocoum" (Rothschild 141), and outcast Mulan's only desire is to fit in. The departure from the previous husband-focused beginning sets up two potentially feminist stories. However, as the stories develop, this no longer remains a possibility. While Pocahontas expresses independence in defying her father's request for her to marry Kocoum, she challenges that she would rather choose her own husband. She fails to consider the option of staying single. She falls victim to the sexist idea that a woman requires a man to be happy. In *Mulan*, while the romantic relationship is almost nonexistent until the end of the film, "the importance of the father cannot be overstated" (Rothschild 146). Mulan tries to impress the matchmaker for her father's sake, her only aim being to make him proud. She joins the army in place of her father, putting her life at risk for his. After winning the final battle, she returns home to present her father with the Emperor's crest and Shan Yu's sword. They share a poignant moment as her mother and grandmother look on from a distance. "The only familial relationship of any importance is between Mulan and her father" (Rothschild 146). Moreover,

both movies deprive the princess from accomplishing the ultimate heroine status. In *Pocahontas*, John Smith jumps in front of Chief Powhatan, saving his life by taking the bullet intended for him. Why is Pocahontas not the one to save her father? In *Mulan*, the filmmakers allow her to generate the plan for saving the Emperor, but “it is Shang who most successfully implements it” (Rothschild 147), and Mushu who kills Shan Yu with a rocket. “Males have the final heroic word in these films, no matter that the stories are supposed to belong to the heroines” (Rothschild 147).

The third wave of feminism does not have a clear starting point, but is thought to have emerged in the mid-1990s and continues on to present day. The third wave aims to expand the boundaries of feminism. It places emphasis on inclusion of all types of women. A central tenet of third wave feminism is to “include certain groups of women who have previously been excluded as a result of race, class, and sexual orientation prejudice” (Jacob). The third wave encourages strong and empowered women, “eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy” (Rampton). Third wave feminism is far more radical than its precursors.

In light of this third wave of feminism, Disney’s most recent releases have completely transformed its princess story. “Disney most recently released *Brave* (2012) and the overwhelmingly popular *Frozen* (2014), two movies that completely cast off the patriarchal clichés of their predecessors by focusing heavily on the relationships between women and treating romance as a secondary consideration” (Eberson). Merida, the princess of *Brave*, refuses to marry a prince selected by her parents, offering instead to vie “for [her] own hand” in marriage. This mention of romance becomes insignificant to the plot as the focus becomes Merida’s relationship with her mother. The two are forced to work together to achieve the

resolution, and through this process, Merida learns to appreciate and better understand her mother, despite their differences. The final salvation is at the hands of Merida, as she apologizes to her mother, thus saving her life. In *Frozen*, Anna and Elsa are sisters estranged by a curse and it is Anna who through an act of true love is able to break that curse. Alas, the protagonists, Merida and Anna, are the strong, brave, and decisive women that feminists have been searching for in film. Additionally, *Frozen* presents a power-hungry male villain, who eventually is defeated by the sister duo, opposing the former ideas of male dominance. While Merida does agree to marriage in the end and Anna falls for her friend Kristoff, these details are much less significant compared to the other relationships in the films. “Finally, female characters are saving themselves and each other without help from a man” (Ebersol 1).

The Walt Disney Company has completely revolutionized its definition of a princess. While its early representations were weak and submissive, the most recent princesses are fiercely independent and strong-willed. This forward-thinking shift and progression is a direct result of the three feminist waves, starting at the beginning of the 20th century, and continuing on to present day. Each wave brought about new ways of thinking into society, which in turn affected media. With the third wave still in motion, the potential is abundant. For example, Disney has yet to produce a film that explores and promotes female friendships whose lesson could be one of trust and loyalty. The strong feminist campaign in contemporary society will likely lead to more innovations in this arena. This shift could not come sooner, as the movies of today are being watched by the leaders of tomorrow. This development is indicative of an evolving general way of thinking in the world, providing future generations the hope and potential for a happily ever after.

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